

A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



Great horned owl

Early Nester

It's February on the Northern Plains and the distant, dangling carrot that is spring – warmer temperatures, green grass and the homecoming of many feathered migrants – is still weeks away.

No matter. One of North Dakota's earliest nesters already rests atop two inconspicuous white eggs that would quickly freeze if not for the feathery-warmth of the adult female.

The great horned owl's choice of when to raise young – it's still winter in February, you know – mirrors its seemingly “yeah, whatever” attitude about nest selection. Vacant stick structures made by hawks, crows, magpies and great blue herons will do. So will stumps, rocky ledges and tree cavities.

The female owl incubates the eggs for 26-30 days. Young are downy, and fed by both the adult male and female after hatching. Nine to 10 weeks later, the newcomers leave the nest.

The great horned owl is a year-round resident in North Dakota. Its far-carrying *hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo* call is familiar, as is its feathered ear tufts, or horns, which gives the owl its name. The owl also features bright yellow eyes, a white throat patch and a wingspan of 3-5 feet. The female is bigger than the male.

The great horned owl is a wonderful hunter, flying silently from perch to prey, thanks to feathers that are ragged on the ends. It does most of its hunting at night, but when food is scarce, it will hunt during the day. Described as one of our largest and most powerful owls, it preys mostly on ground squirrels, rabbits, ducks and voles, but will attack skunks and porcupines.

Typically, the great horned owl will take its prey to a feeding roost. Bones and other discarded prey parts will litter the ground below the roost, giving the curious a pretty good idea what was for breakfast, lunch or dinner. The really curious can even dissect regurgitated owl pellets, which harbor those remains that were swallowed in chunks, but cast to the ground later.

If you spy an occupied nest this time of the year and wonder *hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo, hoo* would dare to nest this early, it's the great horned owl.

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